

07/26/21 Monday

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Super-Transmissible Delta Variant Cited as Biden Admin Keeps Travel Restrictions in Place
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

On Monday, the US Department of Veterans Affairs became the first US federal agency to require all healthcare workers on its payroll to obtain COVID-19 vaccines. The move comes as vaccination rates in the US are leveling off as the country slowly approaches full vaccination for 50% of its population.

The US has declined to lower COVID-19 travel restrictions for foreigners entering the country, citing the rise in infections with the delta variant of the virus, SARS-CoV-2. Even in the US, new cases are hitting their highest numbers since the country's deadly winter climax.

"Given where we are today with the Delta variant, the United States will maintain existing travel restrictions at this point," a White House [official told Reuters](#) on Monday. "Driven by the Delta variant, cases are rising here at home, particularly among those who are unvaccinated and appear likely to continue to increase in the weeks ahead."

"The administration understands the importance of international travel and is united in wanting to reopen international travel in a safe and sustainable manner," the official added. The airline, hotel and cruise ship industries have heavily lobbied for the restrictions to be relaxed.

On July 23, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention ([CDC](#)) [recorded](#) 64,317 new cases of COVID-19, more than six times the number of cases a month ago. Rochelle Walensky, the center's director, [recently noted](#) that as much as 83% of new US infections are by the delta variant, which is significantly more infectious than the original SARS-CoV-2 and can even cause blunted infections in fully vaccinated people.

In the US, however, new [cases are sweeping](#) through some of the country's most unvaccinated regions, including Florida, Texas, Alabama, and Missouri, where many state governors have refused to put in place new social restrictions to limit the virus' spread and even voiced open contempt for such initiatives, including vaccines, as Florida Governor [Ron DeSantis did recently](#). British microbiologist Sharon Peacock told Reuters on Monday, "The biggest risk to the world at the moment is simply Delta," which she called the "fittest and fastest variant yet."

Around the world, restrictions are returning amid a spike in cases.

Israel on Monday banned non-travelers from Ben Gurion International Airport and brought back mask mandates and traveler quarantines weeks ago after it became apparent that the delta variant wouldn't spare the country despite its high vaccination rate. In Kuwait, unvaccinated people are banned from some shops, and Kazakhstan, which on Monday recorded a record high number of cases, has limited the hours of businesses and closed public facilities such as swimming pools.

However, South African President Cyril Ramaphosa on Monday announced the relaxation of some COVID-19 safety measures after a 20% decline in cases from last week. Riots there

[earlier this month](#) were amplified by economic desperation created by prolonged COVID-19 lockdowns, leaving unemployment higher than 50% in some parts of the country.

The White House said Monday it was not considering a national-level mask mandate and was leaving it up to local governments to decide to do so.

Scott Gottlieb, who was Food and Drug Administration commissioner from 2017 until 2019 under then-US President Donald Trump, told [CBS on Sunday](#) he believes that "there is more virus than we're picking up right now," noting that the CDC's modeling of the new infection wave suggests it doesn't have a great understanding of where this wave is headed.

[The latest projection](#) for the next three weeks says there could be anywhere from 90,000 to 800,000 new COVID-19 cases in the US. That could mean either the wave is about to crest, or the last month's worth of cases were only just the beginning.

Gottlieb said CDC scientists "need to understand whether or not vaccinated people are developing subclinical and mild infections and whether or not they can spread the virus, because that's going to inform the kinds of decisions that they make."

"It's a question I get a lot from vaccinating individuals is whether or not they can spread the infection," he added. "Again, we know that they were far less likely to spread the infection with the other variants. We don't know a lot about this Delta. This is a question that can be answered, and CDC should be looking at this."

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Burundi Stands Up to Foreign Mining Firms, Bans Rare Earth Exports Without Better Profit-Sharing

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

A former German-Belgian colony, Burundi has remained poor long after independence thanks to decades of civil war along ethnic lines drawn and amplified to ease colonial rule and unequal extraction arrangements signed with multinational corporations.

Burundi's government has clamped down on what it says are unfair deals with foreign mining companies, blocking exports of high-demand rare earth metals until profits from the operation are more equitably shared with the impoverished country.

"The state, which owns the soil and minerals, is not making a profit as it should," Ibrahim Uwizeye, Burundi's Minister of Water, Energy and Minerals, said to a group of mining firms doing business in the country in a recent letter that was recently [viewed by AFP](#).

Describing the agreements as "unbalanced," Uwizeye wrote, "We want to renegotiate all these agreements for the benefit of the people, because these minerals must be used to finance the development of the country."

Uwizeye [further told Xinhua](#) News Agency that he had previously asked the companies in April to stop exporting minerals; now he's asked them to stop mining altogether until the issue of profits is settled.

"I have invited owners of mining companies to renegotiate new terms that benefit them and the people of Burundi," he told the Chinese news service, emphasizing he expects "equal sharing" of the central African country's wealth.

"We want to renegotiate all these agreements for the benefit of Burundian people who look to these minerals to finance the development of the country," Uwizeye told Turkey's [Anadolu Agency](#) in a separate interview.

Mining Offers Big Hopes, Small Cuts

According to Anadolu, Burundi expects to make just \$1.5 million from mining in fiscal year 2021. While mining doesn't form a major part of Burundi's economic activity, it is a majority of the country's exports and its [largest source](#) of foreign currency. In 2019, nearly half the [country's exports](#) were of gold, to the tune of \$137 million. More recently, rare earth metal mining has become a major potential source of wealth.

A 10-year development plan unveiled in 2017 hoped to expand mining operations by as much as 47%, which would fuel economic growth of up to 10.7%.

The only operating mine in Africa for rare earth metals, a group of 17 reactive metals and useful metals often found together, is the Garaka project in western Burundi, operated by Rainbow Rare Earths, a firm listed in the United Kingdom.

In 2015, Rainbow was granted a 25-year mining license on a 39-square-kilometer plot of land; the Burundian government owns 10% of the company. It began exporting rare earths in late 2017 and in 2018, exported 1,000 metric tons of rare earth oxides, making it the ninth largest exporter in the world that year, according to the [US Geological Survey](#).

Rare earths aren't rare in the Earth's crust, but their expensive and toxic processing makes them highly prized. They're used in everything from making powerful magnets to the catalytic converters in automobiles and, perhaps most essentially, the manufacturing of electronics. Burundi's rare earth deposits are said by Rainbow to be some of the world's highest-quality deposits, particularly due to the near-absence of uranium in the ores, which greatly increases the safety of processing and decreases its cost.

Another company, African Mining Burundi Ltd., was granted a license to mine gold at nine sites in Burundi in 2018, and the government obtained a 15% stake in the company, [Bloomberg reported](#) at the time.

Trade War Fuels Investment

As the trade war between the US and China heated up in 2019, China's production of rare earths [became a pawn](#) in the struggle, and Beijing threatened to cut off its supply to the world. That year, the country produced 120,000 tons of rare earths, nearly 80% of the world total. The crunch sent the US looking for other sources, and the US Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) [began investing](#) in mines outside China, including Rainbow and its operation at Garaka.

In October 2020, the [DLA put \\$25 million](#) into TechMet, a Dublin-based firm that began a £3 million partnership with Rainbow in 2018 to develop a rare earths processing facility outside Africa, likely in the United States, according to the [Financial Times](#).

TechMet, in turn, was founded in 2017 by Brian Menell, a former executive from the South African diamond mining near-monopoly De Beers and holding conglomerate Anglovaal. It also [operates a tin](#) and tungsten mine in Rwanda, a lithium-ion battery project in Canada, and is developing a nickel and cobalt mine in Brazil.

Smelling blood in the water, Rainbow's CEO, George Bennett, told [The Africa Report](#) in 2019 that he anticipated the Garaka site could produce 10,000 tons of rare earths for 10 years - although he told the [Financial Times](#) it might be 20,000 tons, equivalent to the national output of rare earths by Australia, the world's second-largest producer.

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'Imagined Enemy': Beijing Says US Must Abandon Sanctions, Meng Extradition, to Repair Relationship
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In response to US sanctions against Chinese firms and officials, Beijing has begun issuing its own reciprocal measures, including most recently former US Commerce Secretary Wilbur Ross and Sophie Richardson, director of Human Rights Watch's China department, among four others on Saturday.

At a meeting with his US counterpart on Monday, Chinese foreign vice-minister Xie Feng presented the US with two lists: one contained remedial actions Beijing expected from Washington before further meetings would be agreed to, and the other a list of concerns China has about actions and policies in the United States.

US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman went into Monday's meetings in Tianjin "to ensure that there are guardrails and parameters in place to responsibly manage the relationship" with China, a senior Biden administration official told [Reuters on Saturday](#).

"She's going to underscore that we do not want that stiff and sustained competition to veer into conflict," the official said. "Everyone needs to play by the same rules and on a level playing field."

However, as is often the case in international diplomacy, the two nations clearly have different ideas of what a "level playing field" looks like. That was the message Xie delivered, saying in a [statement after his meeting](#) with Sherman that the US-China relationship had reached a "stalemate and faces serious difficulties ... because some Americans portray China as an 'imagined enemy.'"

"It seems as if by making China an 'imagined enemy', a national sense of purpose would be reignited in the US," Xie continued, noting how the US frames its relationship with China with references to major wake-up moments, such as the December 7, 1941, attack on Pearl Harbor naval base by Japan and the October 4, 1957, launching of Sputnik 1, the world's first artificial satellite, by the USSR.

"The hope may be that by demonizing China, the US could somehow shift domestic public discontent over political, economic and social issues and blame China for its own structural problems," Xie said. "It seems that a whole-of-government and whole-of-society campaign is being waged to bring China down. It is as if when China's development is contained, all US domestic and external challenges would go away, and America would become great again and Pax Americana would continue to go on."

"The US keeps making an issue with China. It's as if the US side has nothing to talk about except about China. We urge the United States to change its highly misguided mindset and dangerous policy," he said.

According to the [South China Morning Post](#), the two lists Xie gave Sherman included the following items:

Remedial Demands:

- Remove visa restrictions on Communist Party of China members, their families, and Chinese students
- Remove sanctions against Chinese leaders, government officials and state agencies
- End restrictions on Confucius Institutes and Chinese companies in the US
- Stop listing Chinese media as foreign agents
- Stop seeking extradition of Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou from Canada

Grievances:

- Unfair treatment of Chinese citizens in the US
- Harassment of China's US embassy and consulates
- Rise in violent attacks against Chinese and Chinese-Americans in the US

Last week, the US and its allies, including NATO members, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan, [released a statement](#) "exposing further details of the PRC's pattern of malicious cyber activity," blaming China for a number of cyber attacks, such as hacking the Microsoft Exchange Server and various "ransomware attacks, cyber enabled extortion, crypto-jacking, and rank theft."

However, US accusations of malign activities by China are wide-ranging, from territorial claims in the South China Sea to the national security law in Hong Kong, China's policy regarding Taiwan as a rebellious province of the country, and anti-extremist programs in Xinjiang the US claims amount to "genocide" against the Muslim Uyghur population.

Sherman also met with Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi on Monday. According to US State Department [spokesperson Ned Price](#), they had a "frank and open discussion" about "ways to set terms for responsible management of the US-China relationship."

"The relationship between the United States and the PRC is a complex one, and our policy is very complex as a result," Sherman told The [New York Times](#) after the meetings. "We believe our relationship can tolerate that nuance."

"We were quite direct with each other on the areas of great difference," she said of her meeting with Wang. "On areas where we have common interests and there are great global interests, we had very substantive discussions, shared some ideas. We will have to see where that goes."

Prior to their meeting, Wang said on Saturday that China would have to give the US a "tutorial" on how to treat other countries as equals.

"The United States always wants to exert pressure on other countries by virtue of its own strength, thinking that it is superior to others," Wang said, referring to [Price's comments](#) last week that Sherman was going into the summit from a position of strength after meetings with US regional allies.

"However, I would like to tell the US side clearly that there has never been a country in this world that is superior to others, nor should there be, and China will not accept any country claiming to be superior to others," Wang added, [according to SCMP](#). "If the United States has not learned how to get along with other countries on an equal footing by now, then it is our

responsibility, together with the international community, to give the US a good tutorial in this regard."

His comments echo those by Yang Jiechi, director of the CPC's Central Foreign Affairs Commission and leading diplomat at the [2+2 talks in Anchorage](#), Alaska, in March, who at the time told US Secretary of State Antony Blinken that the US was not qualified to speak from a position of strength when criticizing China.

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No US Troops With 'Combat Role' to Remain in Iraq Past 2021 Amid Partnership Shift, Biden Reveals
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, the White House detailed to reporters that the US mission would be shifting gears in Iraq, but steered clear of offering information regarding a potential pullout of troops from the war-torn Middle Eastern nation.

US President Joe Biden revealed on Monday that the US partnership with Iraq would be continuing for the near future, but that no combat troops would be present after 2021.

A joint statement issued by both American and Iraqi officials stated that no American forces with a combat role would be present in Iraq after December 31, 2021. "The delegations decided, following recent technical talks, that the security relationship will fully transition to a training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing role, and that there will be no US forces with a combat role in Iraq by December 31, 2021," the release states.

The statement came hours after Biden told reporters during Oval Office talks with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi that the American combat mission would be shifting more toward a counterterrorism cooperation. At the time, the commander-in-chief had not given any details regarding a timeline for the shift.

The joint release largely reiterates Biden's earlier statement that the US role would specifically move toward advising and training purposes as part of a larger effort to ensure Iraqi forces will be able to fight off any spike in tensions with Daesh militant forces.

Also noted during the highly-anticipated Monday meeting was the Biden administration's intentions to deliver doses of COVID-19 vaccines to Iraq, which has been recording thousands of new COVID-19 cases.

Earlier, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki [told reporters](#) during the Monday briefing that shifting missions in Iraq was a "natural step in these ongoing dialogues."

"This is a shift in mission, not a removal of our partnership or close engagements with Iraqi leadership," she stressed at the time.

Psaki further indicated that the White House would not be disclosing details on the number of troops the administration intends to have in Iraq by the end of the year.

The press secretary's comments come days after senior US and Iraqi officials [told](#) the Wall Street Journal that American troops could be out of Iraq by the end of 2021.

Talk of US troops being pulled out of Iraq once again have been ongoing for quite some time, more so amid the withdrawal of American forces in nearby Afghanistan. Forces had been temporarily removed from Iraq under the Obama administration; however, they were redeployed following the rise of Daesh forces.

Although the Biden administration has not offered a timeline on such an event, it previously stated that American and Iraqi officials agreed on an eventual withdrawal.

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Trump Ally Thomas Barrack Pleads Not Guilty in UAE Foreign Lobbying Case
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Earlier, federal authorities took longtime Trump confidant Thomas Barrack into custody after determining he had allegedly violated foreign lobbying regulations and lied to agents when he was questioned about his practices during a June 2019 interview with investigators. He was later released after agreeing to a multimillion-dollar bail package.

Private equity investor Thomas Barrack pleaded not guilty on Monday to federal charges that claim the billionaire businessman illegally lobbied former US President Donald Trump on behalf of the United Arab Emirates.

Barrack, who has been a long time confidant and adviser to the former president, and even served as the chair of his inaugural committee, submitted his plea through his lawyers in Brooklyn, New York, where the indictment was originally filed by US prosecutors.

A not guilty plea was also submitted on behalf of Matthew Grimes, a business associate of Barrack who is also being charged with violating the US' foreign lobbying laws.

Charged with violating the foreign lobbying statute, obstruction of justice and giving a false statement, Barrack was granted a bail package in New York that was similar to the [release deal](#) greenlighted in California, where he was initially [taken into custody](#) on July 20.

hearing at the Brooklyn Federal Courthouse in Brooklyn, New York, U.S., July 26, 2021.

The judge ordered on Monday that Barrack is only allowed to fly commercial and travel between New York, California and Colorado, where he will be living for the duration of the pending trial. It was also determined that Barrack is prohibited from making any foreign financial transactions or making any domestic transactions that exceed \$50,000.

Per the California bail agreement, Barrack has been fitted with an electronic bracelet to monitor his every whereabouts. Prosecutors had requested the use of the GPS device over growing concerns that Barrack might attempt to flee the country, fears that were further raised by the businessman's Lebanese citizenship and extensive wealth.

Barrack's \$250 million bond is also secured by \$5 million in cash and more than \$21 million in securities, as well as four properties that the Trump ally owns.

The seven-count indictment, which outlines several instances in which Barrack and Grimes consulted with senior UAE officials on possible steps to strengthen ties between the Trump administration and the Middle Eastern nation, also name-checks UAE citizen Rashid Sultan Rashid Al Malik Alshahhi. However, that individual remains at-large.

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'Sometimes It's Hard': Gold Medalist Simone Biles Admits Heavy 'Pressure' at Tokyo Olympics
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Although the US gymnastics team is heavily favored to dominate in the 2020 Summer Olympics, weekend qualifiers saw the group come behind the Russian Olympic Committee by just one point.

American gymnast Simone Biles recently took to social media and gave the public insight into the circumstances that emerge when competing at the Olympic Games, underscoring that the pressure can be all-too overwhelming at times.

The famed gold medalist's remarks came just moments after she wrapped the day's qualifying events on July 25, which put her in position to compete in all six finals - team, individual all-around, floor exercises, beam, uneven bars and vault. Biles managed to qualify for the uneven bars after a ["two-per-country"](#) rule bumped two Russian gymnasts from competing in the event.

Taking to Instagram late Sunday, Biles [acknowledged](#) that even though she managed to pull through, Sunday simply "wasn't an easy day," and also hadn't seen her perform at her "best." "I truly do feel like I have the weight of the world on my shoulders at times. I know I brush it off and make it seem like pressure doesn't affect me but damn sometimes it's hard," she wrote as part of a photo caption. "The Olympics is no joke!"

She later commented that she was overjoyed to have her family "be with me virtually," adding that her close-knit family "mean the world to me."

Bouncing back into training, Biles took to Instagram once again on Monday, indicating that she is ready for a "fresh start" following the preliminary rounds.

It's no secret that athletes face overwhelming amounts of pressure, even more so when specifically representing their home country at world events televised around the globe. No stranger to said pressure, fellow American champion gymnasts Gabby Douglas and Nastia Liukin weighed in and offered their support of Biles.

Douglas, who was the breakout star at the 2012 London Olympics and also performed in the 2016 Games, remarked during an [interview](#) on E! News' "Daily Pop" show that she sympathized with Biles' feelings.

"Honestly, gymnastics is very, very mental," the three-time gold medalist said. "I completely understand - it's a lot. Not only from you, but from coaches, from social media, from media." "It's so many factors, so many avenues of pressure, especially with a pandemic going on," Douglas added.

Similar acknowledgments were also voiced by Liukin, who represented the US during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Writing on Instagram, the gymnast-turned-commentator commented that "people forget that even the very best in the world are still human - with hearts, nerves, pain, stress, anxiety, pressure."

“So let’s continue to spread our love and support to our athletes who are doing something SO difficult already,” she continued, “and then having to also handle the weight of an entire nation and world on their shoulders during a pandemic without fans AND their number one supporters, their family.”

Despite the few shaky moments that appeared during Biles’ performances over the weekend, the accomplished gymnast will be the first woman to compete in all six finals at a single Olympic event since the 1992 Games.

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‘Time to Pay the Piper’: US Court Finds Chevron Foe Donziger Guilty on Six Counts of Contempt
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The Monday ruling came down as the environmental advocate had spent more than 700 days on house arrest as a result of the contempt charges that stemmed from the decades-old case regarding Chevron’s severe oil pollution in Ecuador.

A federal judge on Monday found lawyer and environmental advocate Steven Donziger guilty on six counts of criminal contempt, adding the latest bump in a long list of setbacks to a case that centered around justice for Ecuadorian natives subjected to extreme oil pollution.

US District Judge Loretta Preska outlined in a [241-page ruling](#) that the case before her was “wholly unconcerned” with Chevron’s wrongdoing in Ecuador.

“The court does not question the sincerity of Mr. Donziger’s espousal of his clients’ cause,” Preska wrote. “Nor does it quarrel with the sincerity of his belief that he has been treated unfairly by Chevron.”

“But ‘a lawyer, of all people, should know that in the face of a perceived injustice, one may not take the law into his own hands.’ By repeatedly and willfully defying Judge [Lewis] Kaplan’s orders, that is precisely what Mr. Donziger did. It’s time to pay the piper,” she underscored.

The Kaplan ruling referenced by Preska came about in 2014, when Donziger was made liable for millions of dollars in Chevron’s legal fees, and also ordered to forfeit his laptop and mobile device - two items that contained sensitive information about his clients. Upon filing an appeal, Donziger was hit with misdemeanor contempt charges in August 2019 and forced into house arrest for nearly two years.

Preska’s Monday declaration, which came after a five-day trial in May without a jury, was [blasted](#) by Donziger as an “obvious travesty of justice” that he would be appealing.

“Judge Preska’s decision today is the latest attempt by Chevron and its judicial allies to criminalize me and to send a message of intimidation to legitimate human rights lawyers who successfully challenge the major polluters of the fossil fuel industry,” Donziger wrote in a release.

“The decision marks a sad day for the rule of law, for our democracy, and for our planet.”

Donziger also took the opportunity to reiterate that Preska presents a clear conflict of interest in the case, especially as she happens to serve on the board of the Federalist Society, a

pro-corporate organization of legal officials whose donors include Chevron. Additionally, the lawyer pointed out that Preska had previously assigned the law firm Seward & Kissel to prosecute the case, even though the firm had its own ties to the oil giant.

Speaking to Radio Sputnik's [Political Misfits](#) ahead of the May trial proceedings, Donziger labeled the legal proceedings against him as being part of a "politically-corporate motivated attack," adding that the case "shows the degree in which the Chevrns of the world can arrest control of our federal judiciary - our prosecutorial apparatus - and go after their critics."

"We're in new territory and if they're allowed to get away with what they're doing to me, this is the playbook they're going to use against every activist and lawyer that deals with climate change - issues that are vital to the survival of the planet," he stressed at the time.

The Donziger-Chevron case dates back to the early 1990s, when the environmental advocate joined an investigative legal team that was examining various cases of severe pollution across Ecuador, many of which involved destroyed waterways and contaminated land being used by Indigenous communities.

The legal team ultimately determined that local communities that had been surrounded by dozens of oil wells had "significantly" high levels of stomach, liver, pancreas and skin cancers, a [key finding](#) that was outlined in a study by the group. The case and a subsequent lawsuit was filed against oil giant Chevron as it had acquired the oil facilities from the Texaco Corporation in 2001.

To note, one 1,700-square-mile area of land in Ecuador's Lago Agrio region was so polluted that it has since been referred to as the "Amazon Chernobyl."

Although the class-action lawsuit did see the Ecuadorian courts rule in favor of ordering \$8 billion in compensation to affected parties in 2011, and a later increase by the Ecuadorian Supreme Court to \$9.5 billion, the win was short-lived. Chevron has not paid one cent, instead opting to accuse Donziger's team of offering bribes and collecting information through corrupt means in order to gain a favorable ruling. The case has remained in legal limbo.

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'Pelosi Republicans': McCarthy Disses Cheney, Kinzinger Amid New Jan. 6 Committee Appointment
by [Evan Craighead](#)

US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) confirmed on Sunday that Rep. Adam Kinzinger (R-IL) has been appointed to serve on the US House-approved select committee probing the January 6 attack on the US Capitol building. This move comes days after Pelosi rejected two out of five GOP recommendations from House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy (R-CA).

Though it appears the [January 6 commission will move forward](#), the House Minority Leader did not appear to change the GOP stance on the matter when approached by reporters on Monday. "Some Republicans have been saying ... that the GOP should play ball on this committee. You could get the three," a reporter asked in reference to Reps. Rodney Davis (R-IL), Kelly Armstrong (R-ND) and Troy Nehls (R-TX).

All three lawmakers received Pelosi's approval for appointment, but they were ultimately held back by McCarthy, who demanded the House Speaker also appoint Reps. Jim Jordan (R-OH) and Jim Banks (R-IN). Pelosi has asserted that [Jordan and Banks would endanger the probe's "integrity."](#)

McCarthy brushed the reporter's suggestion aside, arguing that Cheney and Kinzinger are the only House Republicans who would "play ball" in an effort for the commission to have a bipartisan quorum.

"Who is that, Adam [Kinzinger] and Liz [Cheney]?" he floated. "Aren't they kinda, like, Pelosi Republicans?"

Moments later, the House Minority Leader informed reporters that he has not decided whether [the two anti-Trump Republicans will be punished](#) for joining the select committee amid the House GOP's boycott of the group.

Word of McCarthy's latest dig traveled fast to Cheney, who abruptly panned his remarks as "pretty childish."

"We've got very serious business here. We have important work to do," she asserted to reporters on Monday.

Both Cheney and Kinzinger are slated to meet up with their Democratic colleagues for their first select committee meeting on Tuesday. The group's first witness is also expected to make an appearance.

Presently, Democrats on the 13-member group include Rep. Bennie Thompson (D-MS), chairman of the select committee, Zoe Lofgren (D-CA), Adam Schiff (D-CA), Pete Aguilar (D-CA), Stephanie Murphy (D-FL), Jamie Raskin (D-MD) and Elaine Luria (D-VA). [Kinzinger and Cheney are the sole GOP lawmakers](#) assigned to the committee.

McCarthy has maintained that Pelosi is pursuing a "sham process" by rejecting Jordan and Banks from the select committee.

"Speaker Pelosi's rejection of the Republican nominees to serve on the committee and self-appointment of members who share her preconceived narrative will not yield a serious investigation," McCarthy wrote on Sunday, shortly after Pelosi announced Kinzinger's appointment. "The Speaker has structured this select committee to satisfy her political objectives. She had months to work with Republicans on a reasonable and fair approach to get answers on the events and security failures surrounding January 6."

Republicans have also argued that the investigation should focus on why the US Capitol was not properly secured on January 6, despite reports claiming law enforcement had information leading up to the attack.

"The U.S. Capitol and the men and women who protect it suffered a massive leadership failure. We must make sure that never happens again," the House Minority Leader noted on Sunday, claiming the GOP will carry out its own probe on the deadly riot.

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NY Gov. Cuomo Raises Credibility Concerns Against AG James' Investigators in Sexual Misconduct Probe

by [Evan Craighead](#)

The New York Attorney General's Office and the Assembly Judiciary Committee have launched respective investigations into a number of allegations leveled against New York Governor Andrew Cuomo (D), including sexual misconduct. The Democratic governor initially urged New Yorkers to "trust the process," but it appears Cuomo's trust has run out.

On Monday, Cuomo took yet another shot at the New York Attorney General's ongoing probe, arguing this time that he has concerns regarding the "independence of the reviewers" selected by New York Attorney General Letitia James.

"In general, with the AG's review: let the process continue, let facts come out," Cuomo said during the first news conference since his alleged July 17 sit-down with investigators. "I'm very eager to get the facts to the people of this state."

He claimed that New Yorkers are going to be "shocked" when the facts come out regarding the investigation. The AG probe - authorized since February 28 - began based on three women's allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct, but several other women have come forward since.

While urging the public to wait for the facts to come out, Cuomo was hardly shy about floating that James' independent investigators - attorneys Joon Kim and Anne Clark - are biased.

"Look at who the independent investigators are," the New York governor teased when pressed for evidence to back up his alleged concerns. "Do a little history. Go to Google. Google the independent reviewers and tell me what you see."

Kim, who served as the acting US Attorney for the Southern District of New York from March 2017 to January 2018, notably led the initial prosecution of [Joe Percoco, former Executive Deputy Secretary to the Governor of New York](#).

Percoco, a Cuomo aide who likened the governor to a brother, is presently serving the remainder of a six-year sentence handed down in 2018. Prosecutors say the Cuomo aide abused his position as a public official when he solicited and accepted more than \$315,000 in bribes, according to prosecutors.

Clark, a partner at Vladeck, Raskin & Clark, PC, is an employment and discrimination attorney who has represented clients in numerous cases related to sexual harassment in the workplace. The New York governor's bold comments on Monday came less than a week after New York State Assembly Judiciary Chair Charles Lavine issued a letter raising concerns over a statement tweeted by Rich Azzopardi, Cuomo's communications director.

Azzopardi asserted in his social media post that Transport Workers Union President John Samuelson was publicly bashing Cuomo because he is "a supporter of Tish James and she says she may run against the governor."

"I am extraordinarily concerned with respect to the Governor's communications director's verbal attack against the Attorney General," Lavine wrote in a July 21 release. "Demeaning the Attorney General in turn demeans the Attorney General's investigation and at the same time sends an obviously intimidating message to potential witnesses."

Beth Garvey, Cuomo's acting counsel, dismissed the reprimand, arguing that "there is a clear difference between actionable retaliation and protected speech."

"It is clear the Chairman doesn't understand the difference," Garvey added.

He suggested later on in the news conference that, when compared to the Attorney General's investigation, the Assembly's probe is "broader, and has a broader mandate and is independent."

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Former US Senator Barbara Boxer Assaulted, Robbed of Cellphone in Oakland, California
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Former US Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-CA), was first elected to the US House of Representatives in 1983 and represented California's 6th congressional district until 1992, when she secured a seat in the Senate, where she remained until 2017. Boxer, who did not seek reelection in 2016, had her seat filled by then-California Attorney General Kamala Harris.

Authorities in Oakland, California, are offering a reward for information leading to the arrest of an assailant who allegedly assaulted and robbed former Sen. Boxer, 80, on Monday.

The former US lawmaker from California was in Oakland's Jack London Square neighborhood when an assailant pushed her in the back, stole her cell phone and escaped by hopping into a moving vehicle, according to a tweet authored on her behalf.

"She is thankful that she was not seriously injured," the statement read.

The Oakland Police Department told The Hill that the victim, now known to be Boxer, was walking in the historic waterfront neighborhood around 1:15 p.m. local time when she was "approached by a suspect" who "forcefully took loss from the victim, and fled in a nearby waiting vehicle."

Authorities in the area were able to track the phone down to the neighboring city of San Francisco, according to an [early report from Bay Area outlet KGO](#). At the time, officers were searching around the area of Bush and Kearny Streets.

The Oakland Police Department's robbery department is investigating the incident, which carries up to a \$2,000 reward for those with information that results in an arrest.

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Slower-Than Anticipated Vaccine Rollout Poses Risks to Global Economic Growth - IMF

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned on Tuesday that the slower-than-expected pace of coronavirus vaccinations may pose a risk to global economic growth.

"Risks around the global baseline are to the downside. Slower-than-anticipated vaccine rollout would allow the virus to mutate further," the IMF said in its updated World Economic Outlook.

The IMF said financial conditions could tighten rapidly if the trend persists and inflation expectations may increase quicker than anticipated.

"A double hit to emerging market and developing economies from worsening pandemic dynamics and tighter external financial conditions would severely set back their recovery and drag global growth below this outlook's baseline," the report said.

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IMF Revises Growth Forecast for Euro Area Upward to 4.6% in 2021 - World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised the growth forecast for the Euro area to 4.6 percent in 2021 and to 4.3 percent in 2022, the fund said in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

The IMF also said in the report that it has increased its initial projection by 0.2 percent for this year and by 0.5 percent for 2022.

The IMF said Spain is projected to grow 6.2 percent this year, while Germany, France and Italy are projected to grow by 3.6 percent, 5.8 percent and 4.9 percent, respectively.

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IMF Revises Forecast for Economic Growth in China to 8.1% in 2021 - World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has revised downward its forecast for economic growth in China to 8.1 percent this year, but increased it to 5.7 percent for 2022, the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

"China's 2021 forecast is revised down 0.3 percentage point on a scaling back of public investment and overall fiscal support," the report said relative to its outlook released in April.

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IMF Revises Upward Forecast for US Economic Growth to 7% in 2021- World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) revised its forecast for US economic growth to 7 percent in 2021 and to 4.9 percent in 2022, the fund said in its World Economic Outlook on Tuesday.

The initial projections made in the previous World Economic Outlook in April have been increased by 0.6 percent for 2021 and 1.4 percent for 2022, respectively, the IMF said.

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Global Trade Projected to Expand 9.7% in 2021, 7% in 2022 - IMF

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Global trade will expand 9.7 percent in 2021 and 7 percent next year, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) revealed in its updated World Economic Outlook report on Tuesday.

"Despite near-term supply disruptions, global trade volumes are projected to expand 9.7 percent in 2021, moderating to 7 percent in 2022," the report said.

The merchandise trade recovery is set to broaden after being initially concentrated in pandemic-related purchases, consumer durables and medical equipment, while services trade is expected to recover more slowly due to the limited cross-border travel, the report said.

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Global Economy Projected to Grow 6% in 2021, 4.9% in 2022 - IMF

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The global economy is expected to grow at 6 percent in 2021 and at 4.9 percent in 2022, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in its updated World Economic Outlook report on Tuesday.

"The global economy is projected to grow 6 percent in 2021 and 4.9 percent in 2022," the report said.

The IMF left unchanged its projection for this year's growth from its forecast in April, but raised the projection for 2022.

"The 0.5 percentage point upgrade for 2022 derives largely from the forecast upgrade for advanced economies, particularly the United States, reflecting the anticipated legislation of additional fiscal support in the second half of 2021 and improved health metrics more broadly across the group," the report said.

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IMF Revises Russia's Growth Forecast for 2021 Upward to 4.4% - World Economic Outlook

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has changed upward its economic outlook for Russia in 2021 to 4.4 percent, the IMF said in its World Economic Outlook report on Tuesday.

The IMF boosted the projection for Russia by 0.6 percent compared to its outlook stated in April.

However, the IMF decreased its forecast for Russia for 2022 to 3.1 percent from 3.8 percent it projected in April, the report said.

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RPT - US Airline Assoc in Touch With Authorities, Pipeline Operators on Fuel Shortage - Official

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Airlines For America (A4A) has been in touch with both the federal authorities and the pipeline operators on the nationwide fuel shortage, A4A's Managing Director of Industry Communications Carter Yang told Sputnik.

"We have been and continue to be in communication with federal authorities and pipeline operators to address this jet fuel capacity issue," Yang said on Monday.

Yang pointed out that a lack of available pipeline space for jet fuel as well as a shortage of fuel trucks and drivers amid surging demand for air travel and cargo are adding to low fuel inventories at some airports, particularly in smaller ones in the western United States.

"US airlines are working to accommodate that demand while minimizing any potential disruptions to passengers or shippers," Yang said. "Carriers are taking proactive measures such as having aircraft take on extra fuel at non-impacted origin airports in order to supplement the fuel supply at impacted destination airports."

A4A advocates on behalf of its member airlines to shape crucial policies and measures that promote safety, security and a healthy US airline industry, and works Congress to improve aviation for the traveling and shipping public, according to its website.

A4A comments come amid the reports that the fuel shortages will last through almost the end of the summer.

American Airlines jet fuel shortages that impacted mostly Western cities amid wildfires have spread across the United States and will continue until the middle of August, CNBC reported citing an internal company memorandum.

US media reported that more than 20,000 firefighters were combating explosive wildfires across the West during the weekend, as homes burned and thousands of residents fled fast-spreading flames.

The airline warned its pilots about fuel delivery delays at certain midsize airports and asked them to save fuel when possible, according to the report. The carrier blamed the shortage on a lack of trucks, drivers and jet fuel supply itself, the report added.

The airline also said flights will carry additional fuel into airports affected by shortages, a procedure known as tankering.

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RPT - US-Russia Museum Cooperation to Help Governments Improve Relations - Director

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Cooperation between museums in the United States and Russia will help both countries to improve bilateral relations, Executive Director of the Russian History Museum in the state of New York, Michael Perekrestov, told Sputnik.

"Despite the great challenges of arranging international loans in the time of the pandemic and at a time when the relationship between the US and Russia are not at the best, I am really pleased that we were able to overcome them and to work with our Russian colleagues," Perekrestov said.

The museum, located at the premises of the Russian Holy Trinity Orthodox monastery in the city of Jordanville, represents one of the largest and oldest collections of Russian historical and cultural artifacts in the United States.

Recently, the museum sent several dozens of artifacts to the museum in Tsarskoe Selo near St. Petersburg.

"We provided a loan of 50 objects from our collection to the museum in Tsarskoe Selo in Russia," he said.

Their exhibition opening on Friday is dedicated to the military escorts that accompanied Russian Tsars and Emperors from the 16th century, Perekrestov noted.

COOPERATION DEVOID OF POLITICS

Perekrestov explained that the project is completely devoid of politics.

"Our mission is to share our collections with the broadest possible audience," he said.

Perekrestov also highlighted the importance of cooperation with Russian colleagues as both sides can only benefit from such collaboration.

"We also hope that our respective governments will repair their relationship. I think we have far more in common with each other than we have dividing us," he said.

Speaking of the loan to the museum in Tsarskoe Selo, Perekrestov - a US citizen of Russian descent - emphasized that some of the pieces are returning to Russia for the first time in 100 years.

"Perhaps, the most important one is the St. George Standard that was presented to the Black Sea Division, which was a sub-unit of the Imperial escort," he said.

The Standard was brought to the United States through other countries by the escort unit members after the 1917 revolution. In fact, it was in the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo along standards from other units, but several officers took it out of the palace after the revolution.

"There was an edict of the provisional government saying that all of the Tsarist symbols would be taken off. However, if you take a look at this Standard, there is so much Tsarist symbolism there, including the Imperial double-headed eagle with the crown, if you would move all of that then that would not be much left of the standard," Perekrestov said. "So, understandably, members of this unit went into the Catherine Palace and took this standard."

Other artifacts provided to the exhibition in Tsarskoe Selo include a military uniform, documents, a congratulatory address from Kuban Cossack Host that was present to the Emperor escort in 1961 when they were celebrating the unit's 150th anniversary.

"We were not able to provide some other objects because of their fragility, and we have provided scans," Perekrestov said.

Due to artifacts being in a fragile condition, the museum in Jordanville had to refrain from sending to Russia an original of a big photo album showing the story of everyday life of the members of the Imperial escort shortly after they moved to Serbia, he said.

"These people were working on mills, building roads, lining in barracks, and trying to maintain a sense of the unit in hope that they would soon go back to resume the fight against communism and to free their land from the Bolsheviks," Perekrestov added.

PEOPLE PRESERVED HISTORY

Perekrestov said every artifact from the collection has its own very interesting story, including how these objects left Russia and their journey over the course of decades.

"It is extraordinary to think that these items witnessed world wars and revolutions, a civil war and are now in our collection," he said.

Perekrestov explained the Imperial escort collection in Jordanville was formed from a two-part donation. In 1997, Nikolay Protopopov, the son of a member of the escort and leader of the unit's association, provided a large amount of items, while the other artifacts were donated by his widow, Nadezhda Protopopova, five years ago, he said.

"These people were trying to preserve this history," Perekrestov added.

The Russian History Museum officially opened in 1984, but some exhibits in the Holy Trinity monastery were organized in the 1960s and were mostly oriented to the Russian émigré community and individuals who visited the convent as pilgrims.

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RPT - Biden Pulling Troops From Iraq to Avoid Clashes With Iran, Turkey - Ex-Pentagon Official

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will likely follow through on its announcement to pull all American combat forces from Iraq by the end of the year to avoid clashes with Iran and Turkey, former senior adviser to the Acting US Defense Secretary, Douglas Macgregor, told Sputnik.

On Monday, Biden, when meeting visiting Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi at the White House, said the US combat mission in Iraq would come to a close by the end of this year. After December 31, 2021 the United States will switch to training and assisting Iraqi forces to counter the Islamic State (IS, a terrorist group banned in Russia).

"Biden and his advisers fear the potential for conflict with Iran that our [US] presence in Iraq creates," Macgregor, a retired US Army Colonel and military historian and tactician, said. "They are equally concerned about [Turkish President Recep Tayyip] Erdogan's role in Iraq and Syria." Macgregor, who commanded the main US armored force victory over Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard in the 1991 Iraq War, also said the US economy cannot withstand the pressure that a major regional war would exert.

"As a result, he [Biden] will honor the pledge," he said.

The current Baghdad government led by al-Kadhimi was already dependent on Tehran and its allies for survival, Macgregor said.

Meanwhile, he added, Turkish aspirations to regain control of northern Iraq and its oil fields are "real."

"As Erdogan expands his control and influence in Kurdistan, Baghdad's dependence on Tehran will increase to ensure Baghdadi's survival," Macgregor said.

IS, Macgregor added, was a creature of Erdogan and "US stupidity" and was always designed to fight and destroy Shiite control of Iraq and Syria.

"If Erdogan can focus it on Iraq he may use it, but Erdogan will measure what he might gain by what he may lose by re-purposing ISIS [IS]. There is no point in reviving it if he cannot control it," Macgregor said.

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Plane Crashes Into Woods Near Airport in California, Number Aboard Unknown - Police

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - An airplane crashed into a wooded area next to the Truckee-Tahoe Airport in eastern California with an undetermined number of passengers onboard, the Truckee Police Department said in a statement.

"The Twin Turbo Jet CHALLENGER 605 aircraft was on approach for landing to the Truckee-Tahoe Airport when it impacted heavily treed terrain adjacent to the Truckee-Tahoe Airport along Reynolds Way. No structures or persons on the ground were impacted or harmed in the crash. The number of passengers and crew on board is undetermined at this time," the release said on Monday.

The crash ignited a fire that has since been contained and poses no threat to the nearby town of Truckee, according to police.

The Truckee-Tahoe Airport announced that it will be closed until Tuesday morning due to the crash.

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Pentagon Awards Raytheon \$212M In Contract for F-15, F-16 Jet Engines

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Raytheon Technologies won more than \$212 million for turbofan engines used in the US F-15 Eagle and F-16 Fighting Falcon fighter aircraft, the Defense Department said in a press release.

"Raytheon Technologies Corporation [of] East Hartford, Connecticut has been awarded a \$212,053,200 delivery order against the F100 production program's... contract for F100-PW-229 install engines," the release said on Monday.

The Pratt & Whitney F100-JTF22 is an afterburning turbofan engine that powers the F-15 Eagle and the F-16 Fighting Falcon.

The contract also includes Foreign Military Sales (FMS) to Morocco and will be completed by 2025.

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US Senate Confirms Biden's New Air Force Chief

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The US Senate voted in favor of confirming President Joe Biden's nominee for Air Force Secretary.

"The #Senate confirmed... Frank Kendall III, MA, to be Secretary of the Air Force, by voice vote," the Senate Press Gallery said in a tweet on Monday.

Kendall graduated from the Army War College prior to his service in the US Army Reserves, where he held the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. He has also worked in senior positions at the Center for American Progress, Center for Strategic and International Studies, and the Council on Foreign Relations.

Between 2010 and 2012, Kendall also served as the US Under Secretary of Defense as well as Principal Deputy Under Secretary for Acquisition, Technology, and Logistics.

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US Airline Assoc in Touch With Authorities, Pipeline Operators on Fuel Shortage - Official

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Airlines For America (A4A) has been in touch with both the federal authorities and the pipeline operators on the nationwide fuel shortage, A4A's Managing Director of Industry Communications Carter Yang told Sputnik.

"We have been and continue to be in communication with federal authorities and pipeline operators to address this jet fuel capacity issue," Yang said on Monday.

Yang pointed out that a lack of available pipeline space for jet fuel as well as a shortage of fuel trucks and drivers amid surging demand for air travel and cargo are adding to low fuel inventories at some airports, particularly in smaller ones in the western United States.

"US airlines are working to accommodate that demand while minimizing any potential disruptions to passengers or shippers," Yang said. "Carriers are taking proactive measures such as having aircraft take on extra fuel at non-impacted origin airports in order to supplement the fuel supply at impacted destination airports."

A4A advocates on behalf of its member airlines to shape crucial policies and measures that promote safety, security and a healthy US airline industry, and works Congress to improve aviation for the traveling and shipping public, according to its website.

A4A comments come amid the reports that the fuel shortages will last through almost the end of the summer.

American Airlines jet fuel shortages that impacted mostly Western cities amid wildfires have spread across the United States and will continue until the middle of August, CNBC reported citing an internal company memorandum.

US media reported that more than 20,000 firefighters were combating explosive wildfires across the West during the weekend, as homes burned and thousands of residents fled fast-spreading flames.

The airline warned its pilots about fuel delivery delays at certain midsize airports and asked them to save fuel when possible, according to the report. The carrier blamed the shortage on a lack of trucks, drivers and jet fuel supply itself, the report added.

The airline also said flights will carry additional fuel into airports affected by shortages, a procedure known as tankering.

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US, Libyan Companies Sign New 5G Telecommunications Contract - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 27 (Sputnik) - US company Infenera and Libyan company Hatif signed a new 5G telecommunications deal to improve internet services in the North African country, the State Department said in a press release.

"US Special Envoy and Ambassador to Libya Richard Norland visited Tripoli, Libya July 26 where he met with interim Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dabaiba, attended a signing ceremony for a new 5G telecommunications contract between Libyan company Hatif and US company Infenera, and held other meetings with Libyan and international representatives," the release said on Monday.

The contract is reportedly meant to help provide Libyans with more access to internet services in the country.

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Blinken Urges Tunisia President to Have Dialogue With All Political Actors - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke with Tunisian President Kais Saied over the telephone and urged him to maintain open dialogue with all political actors amid the unrest in the country, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said in a press release.

"Secretary Antony J. Blinken spoke with Tunisian President Kais Saied today," Price said on Monday. "The Secretary urged President Saied to maintain open dialogue with all political actors and the Tunisian people, noting that the United States would continue to monitor the situation and stay engaged."

Anti-government protests erupted in Tunisia on Sunday after Saied dismissed Prime Minister Hicham Mechichi and froze parliament operations for 30 days while also lifting lawmaker immunity. Saied said he would assume executive power alongside a new prime minister who is yet to be appointed.

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Last Victim in Florida Building Collapse Found, Death Toll Reaches 98 - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The last victim in the Florida condo collapse has been recovered from the rubble, bringing the total death count in the incident to 98, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said during a press conference.

"The last remaining missing person has now been accounted for and identified and the family notified," Cava said on Monday.

The death count stands at 98 and a total of 242 people have been accounted for, Cava said. The Miami-Dade Police Department will continue search operations to ensure all identifiable human remains are recovered, Cava noted.

On June 24, the 12-story Champlain Towers South residential building partially collapsed trapping the residents in the rubble. The authorities have so far not conclusively determined the cause of the collapse.

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UPDATE - American Airlines Warns Pilots Nationwide Fuel Shortages to Continue Through Mid-August

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - American Airlines jet fuel shortages that impacted mostly Western cities amid wildfires have spread across the United States and will continue until the middle of August, CNBC reported citing an internal company memorandum.

US media reported that more than 20,000 firefighters were combating explosive wildfires across the West during the weekend, as homes burned and thousands of residents fled fast-spreading flames.

"American Airlines station jet fuel delivery delays initially affected mostly western US cities, but are now being reported at American stations across the country," the memorandum said on Monday. "Delivery delays are expected to continue through mid-August."

The airline warned its pilots about fuel delivery delays at certain midsize airports and asked them to save fuel when possible, according to the report. The carrier blamed the shortage on a lack of trucks, drivers and jet fuel supply itself, the report added.

The airline also said flights will carry additional fuel into airports affected by shortages, a procedure known as tankering.

Delta Air Lines said it had taken "extraordinary measures" to prevent fuel shortages for its flights in Reno, Nevada, which was the focal point of forest fires. It also said there was the "larger issue" of refiners prioritizing gasoline production at this time of the year, putting a squeeze on jet fuel output.

"There is no current operational impact to Reno flying for our customers, that's because of extraordinary measures taken by the Delta teams," the carrier said in a statement. "The larger issue here is that jet fuel has lost pipeline space to gasoline and diesel over the past year due to the pandemic. The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, the pipelines, and the airlines need to work together to allow space on the pipelines to ship the needed jet fuel to the airports."

Energy market analyst John Kilduff told Sputnik the airports in the western United States are running low on jet fuel stocks because of demand from emergency aircraft deployed to fight forest fires in the region.

"It's happening out in the West areas of the US, because of all the demand for aviation fuel that you need there now for fighting forest fires, using chemical dumps and water dumps," Kilduff, a

founding partner at New York energy fund Again Capital and regular commentator on oil market events, said.

Kilduff said the shortage was "really isolated but happening."

"This is a seasonal occurrence each summer and it's occurring earlier than usual this time than the typical mid to late August period, at the height of the heat wave," he said.

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More Americans Than Not Believe War in Afghanistan Mistake - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Forty-seven percent of Americans say the United States engaging in war in Afghanistan was a mistake, marking the second time in US history that less than half of Americans believe it was not a mistake, a new Gallup revealed.

Respondents were asked whether or not "the United States made a mistake sending troops to fight in Afghanistan" -a question which Gallup has been asking Americans since 2001.

The first time that more Americans said the war in Afghanistan was a mistake was in 2014, roughly 12 years after the United States undertook military actions in Afghanistan.

Opinions differ by party affiliation, however, 56 percent of Democrats, 54 percent of Independents, and 29 percent of Republicans said they belie the US war in Afghanistan was a mistake. The last time that a majority of Democrats said a US war was not a mistake was in May 2011, shortly after US forces killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan.

The poll results come amid the final stages of the US withdrawal from Afghanistan. The US Central Command has reported the withdrawal to be more than 95 percent complete as of earlier this month. The US government also announced earlier today that it will remove all combat forces from Iraq by the end of the year.

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Tikhanovskaya Says Belarus Has to Have Normal Relations With Russia

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Belarusian opposition leader Svetlana Tikhanovskaya said her country has to have a normal relationship with Russia, but Moscow should refrain from interfering in Minsk's internal issues.

"We want to continue trade profitable for both countries, we will always be neighbors, and we have to create normal relationship," Tikhanovskaya said at the Council of Foreign Relations in New York on Monday.

The best policy to play a positive role in Belarus for the Kremlin is not to interfere in internal policy, she added.

Tikhanovskaya suggested that the Kremlin may want to stop supporting Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko, but it does not know how to do that in current circumstances.

Asked to draw parallel between her country and Ukraine at the time of Euro-Maidan in 2014, Tikhanovskaya mentioned a different context of the two situation.

"We can see a lot of parallels, but also we can see a lot of differences. In Belarus, we do not have this anti-Russian or pro-European course. Everything we want is to give people a right to choose whom they want [to be]," she said.

Tikhanovskaya started her visit to the US on July 18. She has already met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Under Secretary Victoria Nuland, State Department Counselor Derek Chollet, and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan.

This week, Tikhanovskaya is expected to meet with UN Security Council representatives. She told her supporters in New York that she wanted to ask them to "have Belarus on the agenda."

After her stay in New York, Tikhanovskaya is expected to have meeting in San Francisco from July 28-29, and in Los Angeles from July 30-31.

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US Bans Flights Operating Below 26,000 Feet Over Afghanistan - Aviation Agency

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) has placed new restrictions banning US civilian flights from flying below 26,000 feet over most of Afghanistan due to the changing security situation in the country, the agency said in a statement to Sputnik. "The FAA put flight restrictions in place over Afghanistan for US airlines and other US operators, including those holding US pilot certificates... Flights operating below 26,000 feet are prohibited in the Kabul Flight Information Region, which largely covers the country of Afghanistan, unless operating in and out of Hamid Karzai International Airport," the agency said on Monday. The FAA said the restrictions do not apply to US military flights. A copy of the FAA's notice specifically states that the new restrictions are due to the risk posed by extremist and militant activity in the country.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) -

US-IRAQ RELATIONS

* There will be no US forces with a combat role in Iraq after December 31, the US and Iraqi governments said in a joint statement following the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue on Monday.

UNREST IN TUNISIA

- * The United Nations is calling on all stakeholders in Tunisia to exercise restraint, avoid violence and resolve disputes through dialogue amid the ongoing political crisis in the country, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Monday.
- * The United States is concerned about the crisis developing in Tunisia and Biden administration officials are in touch with the Tunisian leaders to understand the situation, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.
- * Germany is concerned over the escalating political turmoil in Tunisia and is calling for bringing the country back into a state of constitutional legal order, the foreign ministry's spokeswoman, Maria Adebahr, said,
- * The Kremlin follows developments in Tunisia, currently engulfed in a political turmoil, and hopes nothing will jeopardize citizens' safety and stability, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

RUSSIA'S GAS TRANSIT VIA UKRAINE

- * Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak said that he had not received any requests from European partners to organize a meeting on the possible extension of transit of Russian gas via Ukraine beyond 2024.

NEW LEBANESE GOVERNMENT

- * Former Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati received the majority of parliamentary votes needed to receive a mandate from President Michel Aoun to form a government, the NBN broadcaster reported.
- * Lebanese President Michel Aoun authorized Mikati to form a new government, Aoun's office said.

TOKYO OLYMPIC GAMES

- * Russian athlete Maksim Khramtsov won the taekwondo gold medal in the men's -80kg weight category at the Tokyo Olympics on Monday.
- * The Japanese team won gold medals in table tennis mixed doubles at Tokyo Olympics after defeating contenders from China.
- * The male artistic gymnastics team of the Russian Olympic Committee (ROC) won the team tournament at the Tokyo Games.
- * Russian athlete Sofia Pozdniakova won a gold medal in the women's sabre individual category of fencing at the Tokyo Olympics. The silver medal also went to the Russian team as Pozdniakova faced Sofya Velikaya in the final and won 15-11.

RUSSIA-JAPAN RELATIONS

- * Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov expressed the belief that a peace treaty could end the territorial dispute between Russia and Japan.
- * Russia has a strong political will to develop relations with Japan, Peskov said.
- * Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Igor Morgulov lodged a protest to Japanese Ambassador Toyohisa Kozuki over Tokyo's recent unfriendly steps related to territorial claims, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

BELAVIA PLANE INCIDENT IN MOSCOW

* A Belavia Boeing 737 en route from Minsk to Antalya changed course and made an emergency landing in Moscow with one engine off, a source in the aviation sector told Sputnik on Monday.

* The Belarusian embassy in Moscow has not yet received any requests for assistance after Belavia's aircraft made an emergency landing in Moscow, but is ready to help, the diplomatic mission told Sputnik.

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All US Combat Forces Will Leave Iraq by December 31 - Joint Statement

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - There will be no US forces with a combat role in Iraq after December 31, the US and Iraqi governments said in a joint statement following the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue on Monday.

"The delegations decided, following recent technical talks, that the security relationship will fully transition to a training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing role, and that there will be no US forces with a combat role in Iraq by December 31, 2021," the joint statement said.

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US Stocks Hit Record Highs in Anticipation of Big Tech Earnings, Federal Reserve Meeting

NEW YORK, July 26 (Sputnik) - Stocks on Wall Street extended their record highs from last week, with all the three main indices hitting new peaks ahead of a busy week of earnings from big tech companies and updates on US monetary policy and second quarter economic performance.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, hit an all-time high of 35,150 before closing at 35,144, up 83 points or 0.2 percent on the day.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, closed at a record high of 4,415, up 11 points, or 0.3 percent.

The tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite peaked at 14,864 before flat at 14,841. Nasdaq groups high-flying tech names as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google - all of which are to report second-quarter earnings this week.

"Today was the calm before the storm," Ed Moya, analyst at New York-based brokerage firm OANDA, said. "No one anticipated any major positioning ahead of this week's big-tech earnings bonanza, FOMC decision and first look at second quarter GDP and the Fed's preferred inflation gauge."

The FOMC, or Federal Open Market Committee of the Federal Reserve, will hold its July policy meeting between Tuesday and Wednesday to decide on interest rates and other important monetary matters.

The FOMC is not expected to make any changes for July, although it could provide more details about when the central bank hopes to begin tapering the monthly purchase of \$120 billion of bonds that it has been doing since the coronavirus pandemic broke out 16 months ago. On Thursday, investors will also get a first look at the second-quarter US GDP, which is expected to show the peak of post-pandemic recovery.

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Biden Reverses Trump Policy, Toughens Rule on Coal-Fired Power Plant Wastewater - EPA

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has tightened the rules for the discharge of toxic waters from coal-fired power plants, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said on Monday in a move to undo his predecessor Donald Trump's less-stringent policies governing waste fluids.

"EPA is committed to science-based policy decisions to protect our natural resources and public health," Administrator Michael Regan said. "In conducting a review of the 2020 rule as directed by President Biden, EPA determined that moving forward with implementing the existing regulations would ensure that water resources are protected now, while we quickly move to strengthen water quality protections and further reduce power plant pollution that can contain toxic metals such as mercury, arsenic and selenium."

Officials said the power plant-related wastewater rule is one of the Trump policies the Biden team was reversing to tackle climate change and fight pollution prevalent in the poorest US communities.

The Trump EPA policy had forced many coal plants to treat wastewater with modern filtration methods and other technology before it reached waterways that provide drinking water for thousands of Americans.

Since taking office in January, Biden has put climate change at the front and center of his administration, setting an ambitious goal to cut greenhouse gas emissions by 50 percent from 2005 levels by the end of this decade. Biden has also pushed for electric vehicle charging stations, offshore wind development and other clean energy production.

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Refugee Family's Son Organizes Washington Protest to Back Cuban Regime Change - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - A 26-year-old Cuban-American who fled from Cuba at the age of eight organized a rally and protest march to the Cuban Embassy in Washington, DC,

urging the United States to support regime change and reform in his native land, media reported on Monday.

The rally at 2:00 p.m. ET on Monday was followed by a march from Pennsylvania Avenue near the White House to the Cuban Embassy on 16th street in the US capital, the Tampa Bay Times reported.

The rally and march were both organized by Alian Collazo, 26, who fled Cuba with his parents as a young boy. Collazo described his goal as being one to add public pressure in the United States to topple the 52-year-old communist government in the island nation, the report said. The US authorities have granted permits to Collazo and his supporters to hold the two-mile-long march. Collazo publicized his project on social media and has appeared on Fox News to promote it, the report said.

On Tuesday, the day after the rally, Collazo and some of his supporters said they plan to discuss ways to promote reform and change the government in Cuba with the staffs of some members of Congress, including Congressman Charles Crist and Senator Rick Scott, the report said.

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US-Russia Museum Cooperation to Help Governments Improve Relations - Director

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Cooperation between museums in the United States and Russia will help both countries to improve bilateral relations, Executive Director of the Russian History Museum in the state of New York, Michael Perekrestov, told Sputnik.

"Despite the great challenges of arranging international loans in the time of the pandemic and at a time when the relationship between the US and Russia are not at the best, I am really pleased that we were able to overcome them and to work with our Russian colleagues," Perekrestov said.

The museum, located at the premises of the Russian Holy Trinity Orthodox monastery in the city of Jordanville, represents one of the largest and oldest collections of Russian historical and cultural artifacts in the United States.

Recently, the museum sent several dozens of artifacts to the museum in Tsarskoe Selo near St. Petersburg.

"We provided a loan of 50 objects from our collection to the museum in Tsarskoe Selo in Russia," he said.

Their exhibition opening on Friday is dedicated to the military escorts that accompanied Russian Tsars and Emperors from the 16th century, Perekrestov noted.

COOPERATION DEVOID OF POLITICS

Perekrestov explained that the project is completely devoid of politics.

"Our mission is to share our collections with the broadest possible audience," he said.

Perekrestov also highlighted the importance of cooperation with Russian colleagues as both sides can only benefit from such collaboration.

"We also hope that our respective governments will repair their relationship. I think we have far more in common with each other than we have dividing us," he said.

Speaking of the loan to the museum in Tsarskoe Selo, Perekrestov - a US citizen of Russian descent - emphasized that some of the pieces are returning to Russia for the first time in 100 years.

"Perhaps, the most important one is the St. George Standard that was presented to the Black Sea Division, which was a sub-unit of the Imperial escort," he said.

The Standard was brought to the United States through other countries by the escort unit members after the 1917 revolution. In fact, it was in the Catherine Palace in Tsarskoe Selo along standards from other units, but several officers took it out of the palace after the revolution.

"There was an edict of the provisional government saying that all of the Tsarist symbols would be taken off. However, if you take a look at this Standard, there is so much Tsarist symbolism there, including the Imperial double-headed eagle with the crown, if you would move all of that then that would not be much left of the standard," Perekrestov said. "So, understandably, members of this unit went into the Catherine Palace and took this standard."

Other artifacts provided to the exhibition in Tsarskoe Selo include a military uniform, documents, a congratulatory address from Kuban Cossack Host that was present to the Emperor escort in 1961 when they were celebrating the unit's 150th anniversary.

"We were not able to provide some other objects because of their fragility, and we have provided scans," Perekrestov said.

Due to artifacts being in a fragile condition, the museum in Jordanville had to refrain from sending to Russia an original of a big photo album showing the story of everyday life of the members of the Imperial escort shortly after they moved to Serbia, he said.

"These people were working on mills, building roads, lining in barracks, and trying to maintain a sense of the unit in hope that they would soon go back to resume the fight against communism and to free their land from the Bolsheviks," Perekrestov added.

PEOPLE PRESERVED HISTORY

Perekrestov said every artifact from the collection has its own very interesting story, including how these objects left Russia and their journey over the course of decades.

"It is extraordinary to think that these items witnessed world wars and revolutions, a civil war and are now in our collection," he said.

Perekrestov explained the Imperial escort collection in Jordanville was formed from a two-part donation. In 1997, Nikolay Protopopov, the son of a member of the escort and leader of the unit's association, provided a large amount of items, while the other artifacts were donated by his widow, Nadezhda Protopopova, five years ago, he said.

"These people were trying to preserve this history," Perekrestov added.

The Russian History Museum officially opened in 1984, but some exhibits in the Holy Trinity monastery were organized in the 1960s and were mostly oriented to the Russian émigré community and individuals who visited the convent as pilgrims.

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Biden Says US Combat Role in Iraq to Be Over By End of 2021

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Monday that the US military's combat role in Iraq will come to a close by the end of the year as US forces switch their focus to training and assisting Iraqi security forces to counter the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).

"Our role in Iraq will be... to be available to continue to train, to assist, to help and to deal with ISIS [Islamic State] as it arrives, but we're not going to be by the end of the year in a combat mission," Biden said during a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi at the White House.

Biden noted that the United States and Iraq are committed to security cooperation, particularly regarding the shared fight against the Islamic State that is critical for the stability of the Middle East.

Earlier on Monday, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the United States' mission in Iraq would change to one of "advising and training" the local forces and the number of US troops in the country would be based on the needs of the new mission.

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US Urges Tunisia to Avoid Actions That Stifle Democracy, Lead to Violence - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is calling on all parties in Tunisia to avoid actions that might stifle democracy in the country and result in violence after President Kais Saied ousted the government and froze the activities of parliament, US State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday.

"The United States is closely monitoring developments in Tunisia," Price said in a statement.

"We have been clear in urging all parties to avoid taking any actions that could stifle democratic discourse or lead to violence."

The United States is particularly troubled by reports of media offices being shut down and urges that freedom of expression is respected, Price added.

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At Least 57 Migrants Die in Shipwreck Off Libyan Coast - IOM Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - At least 57 people drowned after their boat capsized off the Libyan coast near Khums, International Organization for Migration (IOM) spokesperson Safa Msehli said in a statement on Monday.

"A shipwreck off Libya claims at least 57 lives today after a boat capsized near Khums," Msehli said via Twitter. "According to survivors brought to shore by fishermen and the coast guard, at least 20 women and two children were among those who drowned."

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American Airlines Warns Pilots Nationwide Fuel Shortages to Continue Through Mid-August

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - American Airlines jet fuel shortages that impacted mostly Western cities amid wildfires have spread across the United States and will continue until the middle of August, CNBC reported citing an internal company memorandum.

US media reports said that more than 20,000 firefighters were combating explosive wildfires across the West during the weekend, as homes burned and thousands of residents fled fast-spreading flames.

"American Airlines station jet fuel delivery delays initially affected mostly western US cities, but are now being reported at American stations across the country," the memo said as quoted by the news site on Monday. "Delivery delays are expected to continue through mid-August."

The airline warned its pilots about fuel delivery delays at certain midsize airports and asked them to save fuel when possible, according to the report. The carrier blamed the shortage on a lack of trucks, drivers and jet fuel supply itself, the report added.

The airline also said flights will carry additional fuel into airports affected by shortages, a procedure known as tankering.

Energy market analyst John Kilduff told Sputnik the airports in the western United States are running low on jet fuel stocks because of demand from emergency aircraft deployed to fight forest fires in the region.

"It's happening out in the West areas of the US, because of all the demand for aviation fuel that you need there now for fighting forest fires, using chemical dumps and water dumps," Kilduff, a founding partner at New York energy fund Again Capital and regular commentator on oil market events, said.

Kilduff said the shortage was "really isolated but happening."

"This is a seasonal occurrence each summer and it's occurring earlier than usual this time than the typical mid to late August period, at the height of the heat wave," he said.

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Biden Says US to Send 500,000 COVID Vaccine Doses to Iraq Quicker Than Expected

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The 500,000 COVID-19 vaccines that the US is sending to Iraq will be there in the next couple of weeks, quicker than initially expected, President Joe Biden told Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi on Monday.

"I want to tell you, I was told the half a million – 500,000 – doses of COVID vaccine we're sending, I was told you were told they wouldn't come for awhile. They'll be there in a couple weeks, they'll be there quickly," Biden said at a White House meeting with the prime minister.

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Biden Says US Role in Iraq Will Be to Continue to Train, Assist And Deal With IS

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden said on Monday the US military's combat role in Iraq would come to an end by the end of the year and American forces there would focus on training and assisting Iraqi security forces and helping them deal with the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia).

"Our role in Iraq will be...to be available to continue to train, to assist, to help and to deal with ISIS as it arrives, but we're not going to be by the end of the year in a combat mission," Biden said during a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al Kadhimi at the White House.

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First Native Governor-General Sworn In as Canada Confronts 'Difficult Realities' - Trudeau

TORONTO, July 26 (Sputnik) - Canada's Chief Justice swore in Inuit First Nation member Mary May Simon as the country's first ever indigenous governor general while continuing to confront the difficult truths regarding the abuse of its original inhabitants, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau acknowledged on Monday.

"As our country continues to come to terms with the difficult realities of our collective past I know that as Canada's first indigenous Governor General, Her Excellency will devote herself to helping us as we confront these difficult truths together," Trudeau said during Simon's inauguration in the Canadian Senate.

Simon takes on the role months after her predecessor, Julie Payette, was forced to resign over allegations of her widespread harassment of employees.

Simon also takes office amid frayed Canada-Indigenous relations following the discoveries of hundreds of unmarked graves at the sites of former forced assimilation schools.

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US CDC Raises Travel Advisory for Israel to 'Level Three High'

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has risen a travel advisory for Israel to "level three", saying that unvaccinated people should avoid nonessential travel, a statement from the CDC said on Monday.

"Level 3: COVID-19 High. Updated COVID-19 in Israel. July 26, 2021. Make sure you are fully vaccinated before traveling to Israel, West Bank, and Gaza. Unvaccinated travelers should avoid nonessential travel to Israel, West Bank, and Gaza," the release said.

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Blinken Stresses to Colombia Importance of 'Advancing Democracy' in Haiti, Cuba - Official

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a call with his Colombian counterpart underscored the importance of advancing democracy in Haiti, Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Monday. Former Colombian troops charged for their role in the assassination of Haitian President Jovenal Moise earlier this month received US military training, according to the Pentagon. Meanwhile, last week, the Biden administration targeted Cuba with sanctions for cracking down on protests.

"He [Blinken] emphasized the importance of defending and advancing democracy in the region, particularly in Haiti, Nicaragua, Venezuela, and Cuba," Price said in a readout.

Blinken, Price added, also stressed the continuing US-Colombian shared commitment to expanding citizen security and addressing the root causes of recent protests in the region.

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Number of US Troops in Iraq to Match Mission Change From Combat to Training - White House

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will adjust the number of its troops in Iraq as they change their mission from combat operations to a focus on training and advising local forces, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"The real announcement today, or real news today, I should say, is about a change of mission, and the numbers will be driven by what is needed for the mission over time. So, it is more about moving to a more advising and training capacity from what we have had over the last several years," Psaki said during a press conference.

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US in Touch With Tunisian Leaders, Worried About Unrest - White House

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The United States is concerned about the crisis developing in Tunisia and Biden administration officials are in touch with the Tunisian leaders to understand the situation, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said on Monday.

"We are concerned about the developments in Tunisia, which come as Tunisian authorities are seeking to stabilize their economy, confront a resurgence in the COVID-19 pandemic and improve living standards for all Tunisians," Psaki said. "We are in touch at a senior level at both the White House and the State Department with Tunisian leaders to learn more about the situation, urge calm and support Tunisian efforts to move forward in line with democratic principles."

The Biden administration has not yet determined if the political crisis in Tunisia can be called a coup d'etat and the State Department would have to conduct a legal analysis to reach a conclusion, Psaki said.

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US, UK, France's Envoys to UN Will Meet Belarus' Tikhanovskaya Tuesday - Source

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The ambassadors to the United Nations from the United States, France, United Kingdom and other European countries will meet on Tuesday with Former Belarusian opposition presidential candidate Svetlana Tikhanovskaya in New York, a diplomatic source at the UN Security Council told RIA Novosti on Monday.

"The permanent representatives of UK, US, France as well as ambassadors of other European countries to the United Nations will hold a meeting with Madame Tikhanovskaya on Tuesday," the source said.

On Monday, Tikhanovskaya is expected to hold another meeting with the permanent representatives of the Baltic states, Poland, Norway and Romania, another source told RIA Novosti.

Tikhanovskaya started her visit to the United States on July 18 and met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Under Secretary Victoria Nuland, State Department Counselor Derek Chollet and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan.

Belarus has experienced political crisis after incumbent President Alexander Lukashenko secured his sixth term in office in the August 2020 election. The opposition has not recognized the results, claiming Tikhanovskaya was the real winner. The dispute resulted in protests across the country that fizzled out by February.

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US to Maintain Existing COVID-19 Travel Restrictions Due to Delta Variant - White House

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The United States will maintain the existing COVID-19 restrictions due to the Delta variant, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Monday. "[As for] the Delta variant, we will maintain the existing travel restrictions at this point for a few reasons. The more transmissible Delta variant is spreading both here and around the world. Driven by the Delta variant cases are rising here at home, particularly among those who are unvaccinated and appear to continue in the weeks ahead," Psaki said at a press briefing.

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Trump Ally Barrack Pleads Not Guilty to Charges of Illegal Lobbying for UAE - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Billionaire Thomas Barrack, an ally of former President Donald Trump, pleaded not guilty to charges of illegal lobbying on behalf of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in a New York District Court on Monday, CNBC reported. Barrack was arrested and charged last week alongside Matthew Grimes, and Rashid Sultan Rashid Al Malik Alshahhi for acting and conspiring to act as agents of the UAE between April 2016 and April 2018.

They are accused of trying to influence the foreign policy of the Trump administration at the direction of the UAE without officially registering as foreign agents with the US Attorney General's office.

Barrack's alleged actions include talking to former president Trump about being appointed as ambassador to the UAE.

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Russia Presents 'Near-Term' Risk for US While China 'Long-Term' One - General

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Russia represents a short-term risk for the United States, while China represents a long-term one, Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. John Hyten said on Monday.

"Primary risk to this nation, the long-term risk [for the United States] is China, maybe the near-term risk is Russia and we have to make sure that we focus our attention on those," Hyten said at the National Defense Industrial Association's Emerging Technologies Institute.

Speaking about the US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, Hyten said there is an understanding that the United States should not "ignore the threats" in the Middles East.

"But [we should] deal with these threats in the Middle East in a different way, with a smaller footprint, so that we can divert more of our body on the threats in China and Russia," he said. The US government has repeatedly named Russia and China on the list of threats to the United States. In May, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley announced that the United States would revise its leadership development program to study how China and Russia have changed their capabilities to wage war. This assessment is due to include developments

made by China in almost every area of warfighting, as well as the threat posed by Russia's nuclear capabilities.

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US-Led Coalition Has Not Conducted Airstrikes in Iraq, Syria in past 2 Days - Spokesperson

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - The US-led coalition has conducted no airstrikes in Iraq or Syria over the past two days, Operation Inherent Resolve spokesperson Col. Wayne Marotto said on Monday.

"[The coalition] has not conducted air strikes in Syria or Iraq today or yesterday," Marotto said in a statement via Twitter.

The coalition's statement was released in light of reports that an explosion took place in an ammunition depot at a paramilitary camp near the Iraqi city of Najaf.

Marotto said the coalition has the right to self-defense and considers force protection a very high priority.

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UN Urges All Tunisia Stakeholders to Show Restraint, Commit to Dialogue - Spokesperson

UNITED NATIONS, July 26 (Sputnik) - The United Nations is calling on all stakeholders in Tunisia to exercise restraint, avoid violence and resolve disputes through dialogue amid the ongoing political crisis in the country, UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said in a press briefing on Monday.

Mass anti-government protests erupted in Tunisia on Sunday as President Kais Saied dismissed Prime Minister Hicham Mechichi and froze parliament operations for 30 days while also lifting lawmaker immunity. Saied said he would assume executive power alongside a new prime minister who is yet to be appointed.

"We are following the situation in Tunisia very closely since the announcement by President Saied yesterday. We call on all stakeholders to exercise restraint, refrain from violence and ensure that the situation remains calm. All disputes and disagreements should be resolved through dialogue," Haq said.

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US Home Sales Down Almost 20% in June From Year Ago - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - Sales of new single-family homes in the United States fell almost 20 percent in June from a year ago, the US Commerce Department reported on Monday as a supply-demand mismatch and high prices of lumber led to fewer sales for a third month in a row.

"Sales of new single-family houses in June 2021 were at a seasonally adjusted annual rate of 676,000," the US Census Bureau, a unit of the Commerce Department, said, citing figures from the Department of Housing and Urban Development. "This is 6.6 percent below the revised May rate of 724,000 and is 19.4 percent below the June 2020 estimate of 839,000."

Economists polled by US media had forecast sales of 800,000 new single-family homes for June.

"There's a good debate regarding the slowdown in new home sales," economist Adam Button said in a post on ForexLive. "Home builders say that demand and backlogs remain strong but they've changed sales practices because they were caught out by high lumber prices. Others say that the jump in prices this year has exhausted buyers."

The housing market is one of the cornerstones of the US economy, accounting for nearly 15 percent of Gross Domestic Product. US house prices have risen every year without a blip for nearly ten years, appreciating even during the coronavirus pandemic.

The median price for new single-family homes stood at \$361,800 in June, versus the average of \$428,700. In April, the median was just \$341,600.

Residential construction investment has enjoyed double-digit growth since the third quarter of last year. Even so, home builders deliberately slowed activity from April onward to avoid advance buying of building materials such as lumber, which had rallied more than 300 percent in price earlier this year, data shows. Lumber prices have fallen since, to below \$650 per thousand board feet from record highs above \$1,700 in May.

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New York Mayor Makes Coronavirus Vaccine Mandatory for Government Workers

NEW YORK, July 26 (Sputnik) - All government workers in New York City must receive a coronavirus vaccine or face weekly tests as case counts from the Delta variant have surged, Mayor Bill de Blasio announced on Monday.

"The Delta variant is deadly and this city is taking it seriously," de Blasio via Twitter post that went out simultaneously with his live announcement on television. "Today, I'm announcing that every city government employee will be required to provide proof of vaccination or submit a weekly COVID test."

The requirement would apply to roughly 340,000 city workers, including teachers and police officers, as the city faces a third wave of coronavirus cases driven by the spread of the Delta variant.

The number of virus cases has risen to more than 800 on average per day, more than triple the daily average in late June.

Nearly five million New Yorkers have received at least one dose of a coronavirus vaccine, but the speed of inoculations has slowed. Two million adult New Yorkers are unvaccinated, according to city records.

De Blasio's announcement came ahead of the September 13 deadline for school reopening, when a million students are set to return to classrooms in New York.

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US to Keep COVID-19 Travel Restrictions - Reports

WASHINGTON, July 26 - The United States is going to keep the existing travel restrictions imposed to combat the novel coronavirus pandemic, CNN reported on Monday.

The decision came up because of increasing number of the Delta variant infections in the United States and around the world, the report cited a White House official as saying.

The official also suggested that this trend likely to keep in near future.

The official noted that the Centers for the Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) issued an advisory against traveling to the United Kingdom due to a surge of cases there. The official acknowledged the importance of international travel, but noted that the United States will follow public health advisories in the process of reopening.

The US government had imposed entry restrictions for foreign travelers from several countries, including China, India, the European Union and the United Kingdom.

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Biden Nominates 8 US Attorneys - White House

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden is due to nominate eight US Attorneys throughout the United States, including the top prosecutor in Washington, DC, the White House said on Monday.

"President Biden is announcing eight nominees to serve as US Attorneys across the country, officials who will be indispensable to upholding the rule of law as the top federal law enforcement officials for their districts," the White House said in a statement.

The White House noted that Biden has recently launched a comprehensive effort to take on the recent rise in gun violence.

"[Among the efforts are] putting more cops on the beat, supporting community prevention programs, and cracking down on illegal gun trafficking. Confirming US Attorneys as the chief federal law enforcement officers in their district is important for these efforts," the statement said.

If the candidacies are confirmed by the US Senate, the nominees would head offices in the the states of Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York and Washington as well as in the District of Columbia.

Those eight were "chosen for their devotion to enforcing the law, their professionalism, their experience and credentials in this field, their dedication to pursuing equal justice for all, and their commitment to the independence of the Department of Justice," the White House said.

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Biden to Announce Support for People With Long-Term COVID-19 Symptoms - White House

WASHINGTON, July 26 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden's administration is set to announce a number of support measures for those affected with long-term symptoms of COVID-19, the White House announced on Monday.

"Today the Administration is ... releasing a package of guidance and resources to support individuals experiencing the long-term symptoms of COVID-19 or 'Post- Acute Sequelae of SARS-CoV-2 infection (PASC),' known commonly as 'long COVID,'" the statement said.

In particular, the Biden administration released guidance explaining that long COVID-19 can qualify as a disability under a number of Federal civil rights laws, and children with long COVID-19 symptoms may qualify as children with disabilities.

The administration also provided resources on disability support services and resources that could help people if they now need assistance.

"These resources can provide information about what is available locally; help people connect to services, such as transportation and personal care attendants; help arrange reasonable accommodations and access vaccinations; and more," it said.

The number of COVID-19 cases in the United States has reached nearly 34.5 million, with more than 610,000 dead, according to the data from the John Hopkins University. Meanwhile, the country has already seen over 340 million doses of vaccine administered.